

# Nothing to Go Back to': How Climate Change Is Driving Migrants from Their Homes

New data shows how climate disasters correspond with migration to the United States.

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Gricelda experienced her deciding moment in 2018, when she chose to leave the country where she was born after years of not being able to stop the stormwater from seeping into her mud-wall home in the western highlands near the city of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. Drought only added to her difficulties.

Hossain, two continents away, knew that the changing climate was weighing on his life in the late summer of 2022, when he couldn't afford to pay the hospital bill to bring his wife and newborn daughter home. His savings were gutted after enduring a decade of frequent flooding that destroyed harvests in the southeastern city of Feni, Bangladesh.

For Mohamed, his reckoning occurred more recently in 2023, after yet another cycle of withering dryness and torrential rain in Diourbel, Senegal, sparked tensions between him and his extended family.

These were the disasters, some sudden, some slow moving, that finally pushed each climate-strafed person over the edge, forcing each to consider what they would come to see as the best remedy for disaster: crossing the U.S.-Mexico border and seeking out a new life in New York City.

Global temperatures have risen steadily, bringing extreme heat, water and food scarcity, and a surge in climate-driven disasters. Since the late 19th century, the planet's average surface temperature has moved upwards about 2 °F, fueling more frequent and severe storms, floods and droughts that lead to greater deaths and displacement. This human-caused warming is making the middle of the globe, in particular, less habitable than at any time in human history, research shows.

**"Eventually, if constraints are not addressed, no further adaptation measures are implemented, and climate hazards intensify, the area could become uninhabitable,"** the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, or IPCC, warned in a recent report, referring to coastal communities in the tropical and subtropical regions.

In countries like Guatemala, Bangladesh and Senegal, migrants are fleeing places where storms, floods or droughts have piled on, again and again, since 2010. These extreme weather events have strained fragile economies, pushing people to a breaking point. Few migrants blame the

warming planet for their plight. But its impact manifests in their collapsed houses and failed crops. Already, climate-related disruption has become a quiet, yet consistent driver of migration to the U.S.

By 2050, climate change could force as many as 143 million people in the global south from their homes, with hotspots in Latin America, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Governments, aid organizations and researchers have warned about the climate migration crisis, but it isn't a far-off threat. It's happening around the world, and it has reached New York City.

A year-long investigation by Columbia Journalism Investigations (CJI) and Documented found a pattern that spans the globe: Tens of thousands of migrants who crossed the U.S.-Mexico border in 2024 have come from localities repeatedly hit by hurricanes, floods and droughts, according to an analysis of federal data on southwest border apprehensions and international data on major natural disasters.

To understand how climate change may have influenced migrants' journeys, CJI and Documented analyzed more than nine million records of people apprehended by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) from 2010 to 2024 that included information on the cities, towns and municipalities where they were born. The CBP data was obtained through public-records requests [by researchers at The University of Virginia and](#) CJI. In 2024 alone, CJI and Documented identified more than 520 distinct birth places in Guatemala, close to 350 in Senegal and around 100 in Bangladesh. An analysis of the data shows that around 55 countries that saw higher than average migration rates also were devastated by three or more climate catastrophes from 2019 to 2024, according to the international disaster database known as EM-DAT, which tracks major events reported by UN specialized agencies and other official sources.

The data has gaps. It cannot say why a person left, and it doesn't account for gradual, long-term shifts in weather patterns like excessive heat, diminishing rainfall and sea level rise that may be less dramatic than major disasters but nonetheless have profound impacts. But CJI and Documented used the data as a guide to find migrants affected by climate catastrophes who fled their home countries.

The list includes cities and towns like Quetzaltenango, Feni and Diourbel — places that recent migrants left to build new communities in New York. CJI and Documented interviewed scores of migrants — in cafes, food pantries and other gathering places throughout the city — who say they moved here to escape the worsening effects of hurricanes, floods and droughts back home. Most are among the more than 237,000 migrants and asylum seekers that have arrived in New York City since April 2022, putting pressure on the local shelter system and prompting the use of hotels and large tents as emergency housing.

After arriving, the migrants spread across the five boroughs, often ending up in enclaves established by immigrants from their home countries. Guatemalans, now one of the city's largest Central American migrant groups, left the country's western and northern highlands, where repeated storms and prolonged droughts have destroyed livelihoods.

In the Bronx, migrants from Senegal gather to pray in neighborhood mosques, where they form strong bonds with others who have experienced similar climate impacts at home.

Most are from their country's western region, where rising temperatures and decreasing rainfall have made farming one of the region's staple crops — peanuts — nearly impossible. From Asia, Bangladeshi migrants, primarily clustered around the desi grocery stores and restaurants of Brooklyn's Kensington neighborhood, have hailed from coastal areas where monsoon rains cause the Brahmaputra, Ganges and Meghna Rivers to flood.

There is rarely a single, simple cause behind an individual's decision to migrate, but understanding how natural disasters exacerbated by climate change can push people to leave their home countries is "absolutely important," said Felipe Navarro, associate director of policy and advocacy for the Center for Gender and Refugee Studies at the University of California's College of the Law.

"It's not simply that a hurricane happened," Navarro said. "It's that the hurricane caused devastation, and how the state responded."

Many who flocked to the U.S. southwest border in recent years have come hoping to seek asylum in this country. But there is no clear category for protection of those fleeing climate disasters, leaving them in immigration limbo.

Now, as President Donald Trump [rolls out increased immigration arrests](#), detentions and deportations, migrants displaced by hurricanes, floods and droughts are at risk of being sent back to places hollowed out by climate change.

Nevertheless, "They still want to come to America," one imam said.

Article link: <https://documentedny.com/2025/10/22/climate-migration-new-york-city/>

(AA note: I shortened this article substantially. For the full article, hit the link. Also, as the world heats up, we must understand that more and more families will be forced from their homes by heat, drought and conflict. We would do the same. And where will they go? North. Trump's policies of denying climate change, cutting funding for clean energy transition, cutting aid to other countries in dire need, will only make things worse.)